

No Deal
July 9th, 2017

Texts

Matthew 5: 43-48
2 Corinthians 9: 6-10
Matthew 11: 25-30

Introduction

In Britain, new Parliamentary sessions formally begin with a State Opening of Parliament by the reigning monarch.

The Queen processes in a carriage from Buckingham Palace to Westminster escorted by the Household Cavalry. Wearing her Robe of State & the Imperial State Crown, she addresses the members of both Houses from her throne in the House of Lords. MP's are summoned to hear her by an august gentleman known as the "Black Rod." Since the time of Charles I, a monarch is not allowed to enter the House of Commons. Other parts of this ceremony are even older & date back as far the 16th Century. The State Opening of Parliament is traditional pomp & circumstance at its best!

So, imagine my shock this past June, when I heard the Queen read these words in her address:

"My Lords and Members of the House of Commons.

My government's priority is to secure the best possible deal as the country leaves the European Union."

In her beautiful, dulcet tone, our lovely, gracious Queen uttered the word, "deal"! Never in all my born days did I think I'd hear such a thing!

Queen Elizabeth is a mistress of the English language &, I've read, equally skilled at interpersonal relationships. Many say that she has held the Commonwealth together through the force of her care & consideration for every member. Her Majesty would never employ a word such as "deal" – unless she was playing a card game with her great grandkids!

She, of course, was reading the text given to her by Mrs. May. A constitutional monarch has the right to be consulted, to encourage & to warn. She - or he - does not have the right to set policies or dictate the terms of a treaty.

Elizabeth, the Queen, was simply reading what Theresa, the Prime Minister, told her to.

But hearing the word "deal" come out of the Queen's mouth set me thinking. Queen Elizabeth II has devoted her life to Britain & the Commonwealth.

Deals are not what she is about.

And neither is God.

“Deal” does not appear in Scripture at all.

Covenant does & so does “treaty” - in newer translations – but “deal” never.

It is neither a word nor a concept that applies to our Heavenly Parent & his relationship with Creation.

Deal vs. Covenant

The word “deal” originally meant to divide out.

From playing cards to money for the poor, items that are divided up & shared among a group can be said to be “dealt.”

In England, we still call unemployment benefits the “dole” from the time when the parish dealt out pennies to paupers.

But, gradually, the word “deal” has taken on a narrower, more sinister meaning. Today, it suggests gaining something at someone else’s expenses.

Back to the word’s card game connections, I expect.

A deal implies that one party will emerge richer or in a better position than the other party. It is what is known as a “zero-sum game.”

If I buy this plot of land, you can’t have it.

I win, you lose!

Zero-sum game!

Church life & civic affairs can follow a similar pattern.

One person or one group’s preferences can determine what shall or shall not be done.

The rest are ignored.

One party wins; the others all lose.

Zero-sum game!

That is what the Brexit deal is about.

It has not arisen from a deep concern for the wellbeing of all Europe & its citizens.

Rather, it is a crude attempt to get what is best for Britain & to heck with everyone else.

When other nations speak of deals they are engaging in similar tactics.

Deals are about one person or group getting ahead at the expense of another person or group.

That’s why you’d never hear the Queen use to word.

Or God!

God’s Covenants

In the Hebrew Bible, God's covenants with men & women were reciprocal arrangements in which God assumed the far greater burden of responsibility.

God covenanted with Noah that he would never destroy anyone or anything on Earth ever again.

All that Noah & his family had to do was refrain from killing a human being or consuming the "lifeblood" of an animal.

If they did so, punishment would follow.

But God would still honour his commitment to preserve life on planet Earth.

Divine agreements with Abraham & his descendants, likewise, asked far more of God than they asked of the human signatories.

God provided the land & the children; they were asked to abide by God's ethical principles.

Things like treating one's sons equally & one's womenfolk with dignity.

Which, of course, they didn't do!

And yet still God looked after them & fulfilled the Divine part of the bargain.

Even the Torah, God's Laws to the children of Israel, were given in the form of a covenant.

God formulated a list of attitudes & actions that would make life for the whole community happier & healthier.

No stealing, no murder, no gossiping, no eating food that might carry disease.

Simple stuff, really.

In return, God said: "I will guide you & guard you forever. Nothing will ever come between you & me."

There was no deal; no attempt by God to gain the upper hand.

We're talking about the Creator of the Cosmos here!

Instead of trying to game every last human, God tried a different approach.

She promised to love us & care for us come what may.

In return, she asked us to follow some rules & guidelines that would make Earthly life fair & peaceful & wholesome.

In other words, God asked us to work WITH God to help our planet & its people flourish.

Well, of course, some people chose to totally ignore the Holy One.

Then, like today, they decided to do things their way.

THEY are responsible for the mess this planet is in!

But there were - & are - other folk who don't really like God's simple steps for saving civilization.

That's far too easy for people of their mindset.

So they did - & do – make up lots of extra rules.
Regulations that make people toe the line of their particular religion.
Rules designed to let this person in & keep that person out.

THEY are also responsible for the mess this planet is in!

God doesn't really approve of people like that & he worries deeply about those who are hurt or harmed by unkindness & cruelty that is carried out in God's own name.

That is why God sent Jesus.
To set the record straight!

Jesus came with a direct message from God about rules & deals & covenants.

The "New" Covenant

Through stories, sermons & his own compassionate mode of living, Jesus practiced & proclaimed God's way of being in relationship.

He said that his Heavenly Father loves all people equally
& reminded his listeners that God gives good gifts to everyone.
The sun shines & the rain falls on the unjust as well as the just.

When Matt Rasure preaches that text, he refutes that part of Jesus' argument. Rev. Matt likes to quip that the unjust steal the umbrellas of the just, therefore the just get rained on more!

Jesus might have changed the metaphor if he'd lived in a wetter climate!
Or if umbrellas had been invented!

But, Jesus' point, of course, was that God's love & care are given freely to all people.
If there's any sort of deal, then God makes it with himself.
"I know they're a bunch of rotters but send them rain anyway!"

Jesus urged his followers to try & imitate God's sense of fairness.

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Not only does God NOT make deals with humankind, Scripture says that God makes sure that humanity always benefits from any 2-way interaction.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth asking them for money, he assured them that God would reward them for their generosity.

The earliest churches needed so much money.
Funds to spread the Gospel message, funds to care for the poor, & extra monies to help pay church leaders & missionaries.

Paul urged the Corinthians to give as much as they were able.
If you help out, Paul told them, you will have the joy of seeing God's ministries flourish
AND *"you will be enriched in every way for your great generosity."* (2 Cor. 9:11)

When you contribute to God's work, not only do you experience the joy of participating in Kingdom building, God blesses you personally as well.

God says, *"Please do something to help my people or support my church. In return, I'll prosper this work AND I'll bless you personally.
I promise you'll come out ahead!"*

God only enters agreements when it's guaranteed that the other person will win!

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Jesus came to tell people that God loves everyone equally.
He wanted to let folk know that God is a kind & caring parent who takes wonderful care of her children.

We don't have to worry so much about money or status or power.
Jesus said that even our religious attitudes & beliefs were all messed up.
Rabbinic teachers described the Law as a yoke like the one placed across the shoulders of oxen.
It harnessed them together & helped the farmer plough a straight line.
Teachers of the Law liked this image of the Torah.
It helped keep wayward humankind connected to God & on the right path.

But those same religious leaders kept piling on more & more rules & regulations. Simple folk nearly collapsed under the strain.

Jesus declared that the yoke he placed on people was easy & lightweight.
His way of following God would not weigh folk down or place undue burdens on them.
Stricter rules, higher taxes, heavier yokes were not God's style!

They never had been.

Jesus came from God with a brand new covenant.

It was not a treaty or a deal – definitely not a deal!

Jesus came with a lover's pledge from God.

"If you love God & your neighbour, I, God, will take care of everything else."

Everything!

The money & resources you'll need to live on.

The wisdom & strength you'll require to negotiate life's ups & downs.

The patience, the compassion, the courage & the hope.

Everything you will need to help you on your life's journey, God will provide.

Our Heavenly Parent will move Heaven & Earth to make sure that you lose nothing and gain everything by living in close relationship with God's own self.

Conclusion

God is a gamer, after all.

The Creator of the Cosmos has set up Creation in such a way that God does all the giving while we do almost all the receiving.

We are children of a Heavenly Parent who absolutely refuses to make a deal!

Now it's time to follow in our Father's footsteps...

Amen!

ⁱ The Queen's Speech, June 21, 2017, Gov.UK